

Higher salary limit sought for Cleveland water director

THOMAS OTT
Plain Dealer Reporter

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Two weeks after winning controversial rate increases, the Cleveland Water Department wants a higher maximum salary set for its next director.

The request, submitted to the City Council by the administration of Mayor Frank Jackson, suggests the top pay for water commissioner jump nearly 20 percent, from \$161,171 to \$200,000.

At least one council critic questions the timing of the request, coming as consultants begin trying to solve the Water Department's longstanding customer service and billing problems.

"All of this is hard to explain to the public," said Councilman Brian Cummins, who represents several West Side neighborhoods. "What sticks in people's craws is the lack of accountability on the part of top management."

Cleveland is searching for a water commissioner to replace J. Christopher Nielson, who retired in December. Records show Nielson's base pay was \$137,970.

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Dannell Brown, the city's chief operating officer, said the higher salary cap is in line with industry standards for a water system that serves 1.5 million

customers spread across 72 communities. Raising the cap would give the city more flexibility in negotiating a contract with the next commissioner, he said.

"You need someone who's been there, done that," Brown said Thursday. "We think in order to be competitive, we need to have a competitive salary."

The City Council could vote Monday on the new maximum salary, said Kevin Kelley, chair-

man of the Public Utilities Committee.

The council voted 10-8 last month to approve a series of rate increases that will extend through 2015 and raise an additional \$222 million during that period. The typical Cleveland customer's rates will rise 82 percent over the five years, and suburban rates will go up 50 percent.

The council's split was rare. Supporters said the rate in-

crease was needed to offset drops in water consumption. Opponents in large part objected to the city's failure to shake up the Water Department's leadership. They also wanted proof the system is on the right track.

Consultants will be paid up to \$2.5 million to fix problems with a new billing system that have caused thousands of people to be overbilled or not get bills for months. The firm's

work could take up to two years, though officials predict results will come much sooner.

Kelley, who voted for the rate increases, is keeping an open mind on the pay proposal. He said Cleveland should explore what it needs to land a "top-of-the-line water-service professional."

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter: tott@plaind.com, 216-999-5739
On Twitter: @thomasott1